



The Attachment Research Community

Learning in the time of Covid - the role of attachment and trauma awareness in schools

For our most disadvantaged young people having access to trusted relationships is often the only way in which they can gain the confidence, belief and the social skills needed to ensure they realise their full potential

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Even if we were to express it in terms of crude economics (and it is about far more than that), there is no way a school can afford not to be doing this work.

Headteacher²

Concerns for the well-being of all children in our schools and particularly the most vulnerable have grown during the Covid pandemic and the return to school has been difficult for many. Colleagues have described a sense of loss, not only in terms of family bereavement, but also in contact with friends and teachers and even confidence in school subjects and learning. These effects have been felt disproportionately but not exclusively by children with vulnerabilities, such as those in economically deprived communities, those in care and those with special needs. The need to support all children to manage the return to school effectively, safely and without worsening their levels of wellbeing has been recognised by the government, by schools and a variety of agencies.

Attachment relationships in families are fundamental to enabling children's learning and sense of safety. There is a growing body of academic research and professional practice which points to the importance of recognising attachment relationships and the impact of childhood trauma on children's school performance and wellbeing. To be able to learn, all children need to feel safe, in a calm, orderly positive environment. Attachment needs which are not met in families because of trauma – loss, neglect and abuse – profoundly affect children's sense of safety and development. Schools cannot replace families but secure, trusting relationships address the needs of all children and can do much to support the most vulnerable.

By implementing an attachment and trauma aware approach, schools can address the emotional well-being and mental health needs of the most vulnerable and of all students, thereby improving their learning, behaviour and performance overall, and beginning to narrow the attainment gap between different groups. A recent study of schools which had adopted such approaches reported a 49% decrease in the use of sanctions, a 54% decrease in exclusions and significant improvements in terms of pupil attainment. For pupils identified as at risk of underachievement, teachers reported a 33% improvement in reading performance, 15% in writing and an 18% improvement in maths. 67% of staff reported a consistent improvement in terms of pupil behaviour³.

¹ Quoted in: Centre for Social Justice (2021) *Safely Reducing the Number of Children Going into Care* <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CSJJ8864-Children-In-Care-INTS-WEB-210422.pdf>

² Quoted in Rose, J., McGuire-Snieckus and Gilbert, L. (2019) Attachment Aware Schools: The impact of a targeted and collaborative intervention. *International Journal of Pastoral Care and Education*, 37.2, 162-184.

³ ibid

The Attachment Research Community, working with its school, psychologist, academic and trainer membership and a range of professional organisations has developed a 'Call to Action' which proposes that the whole school workforce is provided with better training on the importance of attachment relationships in children's development and the impact of trauma. They argue that to support recovery and build resilience for all members of the school community, and especially the most vulnerable, relational approaches need far greater prominence in government policy.

Drawing on a wide range of reports and research, including the recent Timpson Report on Exclusions⁴, the Leadsom Review of Early Years⁵ and the Centre for Social Justice Report on children in care⁶, the document draws attention to the need for much more emphasis on children's emotional wellbeing in schools and a core understanding of attachment and trauma for the whole workforce. The authors recognise the key role which school leaders play in the development of whole school approaches which meet the needs of their own context. They point out that the adoption of attachment and trauma based approaches is both cost neutral and enables schools to address the very serious needs which the Covid Pandemic has brought to the fore.

Backed by organisations as diverse as the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), The National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH) Adoption UK, the Fostering Network and the Universities Council on the Training of Teachers (UCET), the document calls for specific action in a number of areas:

- Revised DFE Guidance on Mental Health and Behaviour in schools to take account of the emotional and relationship needs of all members of the school community, including staff
- The inclusion of attachment and trauma awareness in Initial Teacher Training, in the Early Career Framework and in the National Professional Qualifications for school leaders.
- Specific support to school leaders in implementing attachment and trauma aware approaches, and continuing professional development for all teachers
- Revision of the Ofsted Inspection Framework for schools and for children's services to make specific reference to attachment and trauma informed practice

Sir John Timpson of the Alex Timpson Trust, one of the co-authors of the report, said:

This 'Call to Action' has massive implications. I have seen the benefits brought by a whole school approach based on attachment awareness. My dream is to see this become a reality in every school in the country.

RJP/TC

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⁴ Leadsom, A. (2021) *The best start for life, a vision for the first 1001 days*
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/973112/The_best_start_for_life_a_vision_for_the_1_001_critical_days.pdf

⁵ Timpson, E. (2019) *Review of Exclusions*
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf

⁶ Centre for Social Justice (2021) *Safely Reducing the Number of Children Going into Care*
<https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CSJJ8864-Children-In-Care-INTS-WEB-210422.pdf>